

## **A Review of Jon K. Newton's Revelation Worldview: Apocalyptic Thinking in a Postmodern World (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015)**

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Jon K. Newton, *The Revelation Worldview: Apocalyptic Thinking in a Post-modern World* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015).

The last decade has witnessed a virtual renaissance in the academic study of the Book of Revelation by Pentecostal and Charismatic scholars. The year 2006 alone saw the publication of three academic monographs devoted to the Apocalypse, including the first full-length study of its pneumatology,<sup>1</sup> an extensive examination devoted to the conversion of the nations,<sup>2</sup> and an investigation of the issues of religious identity in the book.<sup>3</sup> In the next few years these publications were followed by several commentaries devoted to the book.<sup>4</sup> During this time an important monograph devoted to the theme of worship in the book also appeared,<sup>5</sup> along with a number of significant article length studies,<sup>6</sup> and not a few PhD theses on the Apocalypse currently being undertaken. It is indeed a wonderful time to be studying the book of Revelation from within the Pentecostal tradition.

One of the most recent contributions comes from Australian scholar Jon K. Newton (PhD, Deakin University), the Dean of Post-graduate Studies and Head of Research at Harvest Bible College and co-pastor with his wife of the Oasis Church in Melbourne. Newton is no newcomer to the study of the Apocalypse having published previously a monograph entitled *Revelation Reclaimed: The Use and Mis-*

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<sup>1</sup> R.C. Waddell, *The Spirit of the Book of Revelation* (JPTSUP 30: Blandford Forum, UK: Deo Publishing, 2006)

<sup>2</sup> R. Herms, *An Apocalypse for the Church and the World: The Narrative Function of the Universal Language in the Book of Revelation* (BZNW 143; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006)

<sup>3</sup> P.L. Mayo, *‘Those Who Call Themselves Jews’: The Church and Judaism in the Apocalypse of John* (PTMS; Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2006)

<sup>4</sup> R. Skaggs and P. Benham, *Revelation* (PCS; Blandford Forum, UK: Deo Publishing, 2009); G.D. Fee, *Revelation* (NCCS; Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011); J.C. Thomas, *The Apocalypse: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2012); and J.C. Thomas and F.D. Macchia, *Revelation* (THNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> M.L. Archer, *‘I Was in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day’: A Pentecostal Engagement with Worship in the Apocalypse* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> One of the earliest, predating this renaissance by about a decade, is M.W. Wilson, ‘Revelation 19.10 and Contemporary Interpretation’, in M.W. Wilson (ed.), *Spirit and Renewal: Essays in Honor of J. Rodman Williams* (JPTSUP 5; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), pp. 191-202.

*use of the Apocalypse*<sup>7</sup> and having contributed articles on Revelation to a variety of academic journals.<sup>8</sup> Whilst the trend to this point has been primarily to either offer a commentary on the text or to trace a significant theme or emphasis through the book, Newton pushes in a different direction altogether. He boldly proposes to identify and utilize the worldview found within the Book of Revelation as a foundational narrative by which to engage the sometime treacherous terrain of a postmodern world. This tremendously ambitious project is carried out in seven chapters – a good number for any Apocalypse project – with introductory and concluding chapters forming an inclusio around his more substantive work.

In the ‘Introduction’ Newton creates for his readers the context of and need for the project by briefly defining what he means by worldview and describing the clash of worldviews witnessed in the contemporary world of postmodernity. He goes on to propose that a Christian worldview that is responsive to postmodern questions and challenges can be constructed but it will be one that has a distinctive voice in this postmodern context and not simply one that takes fully on board a postmodern way of thinking. In order to construct such a Christian worldview Newton turns to the Book of Revelation because it is the book in the Bible most open to a postmodern interpretation, it is regarded as summing up much of the biblical story, and its foreignness may offer a way forward as how to live with competing worldviews.

Chapter 1 offers a very helpful and penetrating analysis of the shift from modernity to postmodernity and its impact on biblical studies and Revelation studies in particular. Chapter 2 seeks to place Revelation within the religious and social context of first century Asia Minor. However, unlike those scholars who examine such matters with an eye toward issues of origins and/or influence, Newton compares the worldview of the Apocalypse with other worldviews of

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<sup>7</sup> J.K. Newton, *Revelation Reclaimed: The Use and Misuse of the Apocalypse* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. ‘Reading Revelation Romantically’, *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 18.2 (2009), pp. 194-215; ‘Holding Prophets Accountable’, *Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association* 30.1 (2010), pp. 63-79; ‘Time Language and the Purpose of the Millennium’, *Colloquium* 43.2 (2011), pp. 147-68; ‘Story-Lines in the Book of Revelation’, *Australian Biblical Review* 61 (2013), pp. 61-78; ‘The Epistemology of the Book of Revelation’, *Heythrop Journal* (June, 2013), pp. 1-14; and ‘The Full Gospel and the Apocalypse’, *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 26.1 (2017), pp. 86-109.

the day, for which he offers a measured and reasonable assessment. Chapter 3 gives attention to the reality of the Spirit World by examining the world of Revelation and engaging the contemporary context on such matters. Chapter 4 is devoted to the knotty issue of the phenomenon of revelation. Here prophecy, truth claims, and the criteria by which to discern truth from false (prophetic) claims are investigated. This chapter, in particular, focuses on numerous topics of special interest to Pentecostal and charismatic readers.

Chapter 5 focuses on the significance of personhood and offers a very nice analysis of the importance of personhood in the Apocalypse. Chapter 6 examines the centrality of the biblical story in a discussion of the place of history and meta-narratives within a post-modern world. Here Newton does a lot of heavy lifting arguing for, among other things, the place of history in the Apocalypse and the phenomenon of Revelation as story and its relationship to the 'Big Story of Scripture'. It is here that the author explores Revelation as a war story and as a love story, concluding that Revelation – in a sense – can be seen as a Christian meta-narrative which can form a foundation for a Christian worldview.

In the final chapter Newton examines Revelation's attitude toward rival narratives – some of which can be engaged and even transformed (Judaism and certain narratives of the non-Jewish world), others of which must be rejected (imperial Rome and idolatry). He concludes (p. 308):

Thus John shows us a possible strategy for Christians today in their response to other worldviews and ideologies of our time ... Christians ... should not be afraid of claims that involve seeing the Christian story as framing and explaining the narratives of different cultures and providing them with a hope of fulfillment of their highest aspirations in Christ, albeit with alterations and adjustments. Only the most blasphemous (that is syncretistic or imperialistic) claims need to be rejected utterly. In making these responses, Christians are giving priority to the Big Story traced in the Bible.

In his 'Conclusion' Newton goes on to define a Christian worldview as follows (p. 313):

... a truly Christian worldview will always need to affirm the reality of the spirit world (with dualistic features), the validity of reve-

lation (however defined) as a form of real knowledge, the fundamental nature of personhood, and the priority of the biblical story of creation, redemption, and consummation as an overarching explanation of human history.

In my estimation, though quite an ambitious project, Jon Newton has succeeded in producing a very important monograph that makes a variety of contributions to the Pentecostal and charismatic interpretation of the Apocalypse. Its strengths are too numerous to list but a few of them must be mentioned. First and foremost is his extraordinary knowledge of the Apocalypse that he brings to bear in this study. Time and again he exhibits a very deep understanding of the substance of Revelation that goes far beyond the proof texting approach that often appears in volumes devoted to this book of the canon. It is from this knowledge that he is able to engage a variety of issues that always seem true to the nature of the Apocalypse. Second, he is to be commended for his honest engagement with a variety of dialogue partners. Absent from his study are the construction of 'straw men' or 'straw women' with which to easily dispense. He always appears to feel the full weight of the arguments engaged even when he rejects or critiques them as lacking in one way or another. Third, Newton has clearly demonstrated how a biblical book can contribute, at a foundational level, to the construction of a Christian worldview that has integrity and is open to revision as its contours are discerned further in the Christian community. Fourth, his extensive engagement with the Book of Revelation models a way in which this book, notorious for its abuse in the world of interpreters, can be engaged theologically with much profit in foundational ways for the believing community.

While there are any number of places where individual interpreters may have reason to disagree with this or that conclusion or inference, Jon Newton has made a significant contribution to Revelation studies putting us all in his debt. It is to be highly commended. It is indeed a wonderful time to be studying the book of Revelation from within the Pentecostal tradition.

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